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Mainstream Parties in Crisis

It is uncontroversial and dispiritingly routine to lament democracy's prospects today. In the past decade and a half, the gradual downward trend for democracies around the globe—a source of close and frequent debate in these pages—has become a cause of alarm and consternation, as once-free societies falter and new experiments in political pluralism fail to take flight. But if we draw closer to the troubles that beset democracy, it grows clear that the crisis of genuine representative government is in fact rooted in a crisis of one of its key ingredients: mainstream political parties.

When healthy, robust, and functioning, parties are liberal democracy's lifeblood. Ideally, they stand for ideas and interests that are more enduring than victory in the next election. Their services are manifold, including policing their own members, ensuring a measure of policy coherence, and protecting institutional norms. Parties help the polity to remain within democratic guardrails, adding a layer of predictability that runs deeper than the passions and powers of any one political figure. They are, in essence, the organizing device of democratic politics.

Today, political parties are flagging. Public discontent with mainstream parties has soared as they have failed to address voters' concerns. The chasm between voters' demands and what traditional parties have served up has widened, leading to thinned membership rolls and dwindling influence. Traditional parties are no longer trusted brands. Predictably, antiestablishment alternatives—whether far right, far left, populist, or an illiberal mélange—have risen quickly, and threaten to become more lasting features of the democratic landscape.

In the three essays that follow, our contributors examine the currents that have helped to precipitate this crisis. Extreme political polarization is one of the most debilitating forces consuming modern democracies, and mainstream parties are its principal agents. Canvassing examples of this pernicious brand of zero-sum politics, Jennifer McCoy and Murat Somer offer trenchant lessons on how polarization can be managed, and its most perilous forms overcome. Sheri Berman and Hans Kundnani shine a spotlight on the opposite danger—ideological and political convergence among traditional political parties. If the excessive partisanship of polarization threatens to strangle the life out of democracy, excessive convergence leads to public apathy and alienation—and, in turn, presents a ripe opportunity for antiestablishment parties to amass disaffected voters ready to rail against the status quo. Finally, Fernando Casal Bértoa and José Rama weigh the options for mainstream political parties seeking to marshal a response. If they fail to meet this challenge, democratic societies will not need to fear foreign authoritarian powers; democracy's house could collapse from the inside.

—*The Editors*